The Demon in the Text

AI, Poetry, and the New Witch Finder

The possessed text is easy to imagine. The voice sounds human, but something feels off. The words move legibly. The syntax behaves. The paragraphs hold their order. Yet suspicion gathers around the source. Something has entered the body of language. The author is still there, perhaps, but altered, compromised, displaced. The question becomes less “What does this say?” than “Who, or what, is speaking?”

The fear begins with an old fantasy: that human writing comes from an untouched source. Writing is imagined as the most human when it appears unmediated, as if language comes cleanly from the self without tools, influence, editing, habit, training, market pressure, or form. AI frightens people because it industrializes the imitation of what had been treated as intimate. It mass produces the look of presence.

Much of the current panic around AI writing behaves this way. It is not merely a worry about bad prose, plagiarism, automation, labor, or fraud, though those worries are real. It is a panic about possession. The machine enters the text. The author becomes suspect. The work is contaminated. The old voice has been overtaken by an outside force. The text may look alive, but the reader begins searching for the demon inside it.

The search has already become procedural. People run suspected passages through AI detectors as if consulting a witch finder. The detector produces a number, a probability, a sign of contamination. Then the accusation follows.

But the witch finder cannot reliably find the witch. AI detectors regularly identify human writing as AI generated, including writing created before public generative AI tools existed. When a detector finds AI in writing made before AI was available, the detector has failed. It does not work. Yet the author is left to prove a negative. The detector does not discover authorship. It assigns suspicion. Once suspicion is treated as proof, the witch hunt has already begun.

The danger extends beyond literary taste. A culture trained to search for the demon in the text is also being trained in conspiracy. Every fluent paragraph becomes suspect. Every polished argument can be treated as a possible disguise. The reader begins to look less for truth, evidence, pressure, or responsibility than for signs of contamination.

This creates a dangerous inversion. A careful, truthful, AI assisted essay may be dismissed because it has been touched by the tool. A false or manipulative piece of writing may be accepted because it appears clean, human, undetected. The test begins to replace judgment, and purity begins to replace truth.

That is fertile ground for politics. Once writing is sorted by suspicion rather than argument, anyone can claim hidden corruption. The detector becomes another instrument in the larger machinery of distrust. It barely has to work to do damage. It only has to make suspicion look official.

We are already watching this logic migrate into politics. The autopen, an ordinary tool used by presidents, has been turned into a symbol of illegitimate agency. The 47th president has used the 46th president's alleged reliance on the autopen as a political weapon, even placing an image of the device in place of the 46th president's portrait in a White House display. The image performs the possession theory almost literally. The machine signs, so the man must have been absent. The tool appears, so another force must have acted through him. The signature becomes suspect because mediation has entered the scene.

The point is larger than the device. Once mediation itself becomes suspicious, any tool can be made into evidence of hidden control. Detector culture invites the same habit around writing. A text touched by AI becomes less a text to be read than a body to be searched for signs of unclean spirits.

Charlie Warzel's Atlantic essay, "The Feeling of Control Slipping Away," takes up the crisis directly. Its subtitle says it plainly: AI is causing a crisis of agency. He describes a world where the machine seems to act, the human seems to react, and the self feels displaced. The text becomes suspect.

He also reports what suspicion does. After *Granta* published a Commonwealth Short Story Prize winner, readers ran the story and other prizewinning stories through AI detectors, certain they could find the machine inside. The foundation denied AI

involvement, then said it would look again. That is where agency begins to turn into possession. The reader stops reading the story and starts searching for an outside force speaking through it.

The panic destroys the very faculty that might restore the agency it mourns, turning reading into investigation, judgment into suspicion, and mediation into evidence of fraud.

The possession story feeds the panic and helps sell the product. Critics get a demon to denounce. Companies get a world historical product to sell. The more AI is described as an entity, the more powerful it appears. The more it is treated as a civilizational force, the more attention, capital, fear, and publicity gather around it. Even denunciation can become promotion. A culture built on commentary has trouble starving the thing it fears.

Moral panic often works as publicity for the thing it condemns. Rock music learned this long ago. The panic over backmasking, satanic messages, sexual corruption, drugs, fast cars, and juvenile danger did not empty the room. It often made the music more magnetic. The rumor of a hidden message made listeners lean closer. When religious critics claimed that KISS stood for “Knights in Satan’s Service,” the band understood the gift. The warning became part of the invitation.

The same thing is happening now with AI writing. The more AI is described as an outside force entering human language, the more powerful it appears. The critic says demon. The company hears publicity. The curious public hears power.

Blockchain had already shown me this cycle. A real technology appeared, then the story around it outran the use. Promoters turned it into destiny. Critics turned it into apocalypse or fraud. Each rise and crash produced another round of prophecy and obituary. The commentary became part of the market.

I know something about this cycle from the inside. I was involved in Cleveland’s Blockland project while on paid staff at JumpStart, where blockchain was briefly imagined as a civic and economic engine for the region. Much of it was hooey, but the lesson was useful: the promise can become its own product. People were not only responding to a technology. They were responding to the feeling of being near the future. That feeling can move money, convene institutions, produce panels, generate reports, attract consultants, and give a city a story to tell about itself.

AI is more useful than blockchain, and more immediately available to ordinary people, but the cycle feels familiar. The evangelist and the doomsayer both benefit from making the tool seem larger than it is. The demon and the miracle sell the same product from opposite sides.

None of this means AI is harmless. In warfare, surveillance, labor, education, policing, and public administration, the dangers are real and may be grave. Those dangers belong

to politics, law, ethics, labor, and public accountability. They do not require demon language. They require clearer accounts of power.

Around writing, the fear has a particular home: the professional language class of critics, essayists, academics, editors, copywriters, and cultural mediators.

AI threatens professional writing before it threatens art. It can imitate commentary, institutional voice, marketing atmosphere, cultural positioning, summary, blurb, and polished paragraph. It can reproduce many of the surfaces by which professional language workers have signaled fluency and authority. This is different from making art.

The professional language class is not useless. Critics, editors, copywriters, and essayists can clarify, preserve, test, contextualize, and bring work into public view. At their best, they are stewards of attention. The problem begins when stewardship becomes authority over the thing itself, when the apparatus around art mistakes its role for the source of value. Poets have long had reason to be bitter about this.

The possession reflex did not arrive in a field innocent of fear. In poetry, fear often looks like righteousness. It appears as taste, craft, political hygiene, moral clarity, institutional seriousness, or admission to the credentialed room. Workshops, prize structures, editorial screens, and the approved dialect of the moment have all trained poets to anticipate judgment before encounter. AI arrives in that field and gives the fear a new object.

Still, it is enough to disturb the class of people who have long controlled the terms under which writing becomes legible, serious, or valuable. The critic class, especially in the academy, has often shifted attention away from the artwork and toward the authorized interpretation of the artwork. The editor class has often guarded the gate. The workshop has often trained writers to anticipate correction before the poem has had time to take its full risk. Prize culture has made recognition dependent on third party certification. The art itself often arrives only after it has passed through someone else's authority.

I am not arguing against criticism, editing, workshops, or awards. Criticism can be a form of attention. Editing can be an act of care. Workshops can teach listening, discipline, and craft. Awards can sometimes honor real work. But when the structures around art become more invested in legitimacy than encounter, something has gone wrong. The poem becomes less important than the system that certifies it.

Poetry knows this condition well. For decades, poets have watched the larger culture borrow poetry's tools while leaving poetry itself at the margins. I wrote about this in 2005, in "From Poetry to Verse," when I noted that "pop culture itself is embracing poetry, and corporations are using it to sell everything from trucks to soft drinks." Advertising, branding, journalism, campaign rhetoric, nonprofit appeals, university brochures, museum copy, soft drink commercials, and pickup truck ads have all used

poetic effects: cadence, compression, repetition, image, silence, elegy, myth, sincerity, and invocation. A truck commercial can be made to sound like labor, inheritance, dust, rain, country, death, and the American soul. But the same writer who produces that language may turn to a poet and say, almost casually, that he does not get poetry.

What does that mean? A professional writer can use poetry's tools while refusing the art form itself. He can borrow cadence and compression while treating the poem as obscure. He can create atmosphere while declining to study the tradition from which atmosphere has been taken. He can use repetition, image, turn, tone, and implied silence, then shrug at the art that developed those pressures in the first place.

Poetry's techniques were extracted into professional language long before AI arrived. AI merely extends that extraction to the professional language class itself.

There is a bitter recognition here. Poets have been saying this for a long time. They have watched the language of the poem circulate freely while the poem itself remained awkward, marginal, obscure, decorative, or professionally inconvenient. The writing program often favored fiction. The critic often treated the poem as another difficult little object to be explained, decoded, or passed over. The advertising writer could borrow poetry's tools and then say, almost proudly, that poetry made no sense.

Now AI can imitate many of the surfaces of professional prose: the blurb, the summary, the institutional paragraph, the cultural diagnosis, the market language, the softened moral urgency, the little hum of authority. The professional language class is now discovering a condition poets have lived with for decades.

AI did not arrive in an innocent field. It entered a literary and professional culture already shaped by extraction, mediation, gatekeeping, formula, fraud, and the collapse of attention.

The current panic depends on a false memory of writing before AI. Writing was never pure. Authorship has always involved tools, influence, editors, teachers, publishers, friends, workshops, dictionaries, markets, deadlines, institutions, technologies, and ghosts. Mediation has always been present. The pressure now is whether the human remains present, necessary, responsible, and answerable inside the mediation.

That pressure has been blurred in recent decades. Every writer became a creator. Every polished essay became art. Every brand became storytelling. Every professional language product became some form of creativity. Book proposals, newsletters, campaign statements, donor letters, museum labels, cultural essays, scripts, slogans, memoir fragments, and social media captions all got folded into a flattened field of expressive production.

Artfulness is easy to mistake for art. An essay can be artistic. So can a sermon, a legal argument, a political speech, or a Baldwin essay. A book can become an artistic object

through structure, sequence, papers, images, typography, documents, and design. But artfulness is not the same as art. Not every artful act of prose carries the same contract as a poem, painting, novel, short story, or musical composition.

Writing can be artistic. Of course it can. But artfulness, fluency, and professional expression are not the same as creative necessity.

A poem asks more of its source. I am arguing for the human source of the poem, but source is not a watermark. It is not something a reader should be expected to detect by scanning the surface. If it were, I would be rebuilding the same logic I have just criticized. I would be asking for a better witch finder.

The authority of the poem does not depend on a hidden mark proving that a human wrote it. It depends on the maker being answerable for what has been made.

The fear should be named plainly. Some AI writing really is authorial evacuation. It is the student who enters a prompt and submits the answer without testing it. It is the writer with no pressure of their own asking the machine for ideas and then following them. It is fluent language without inquiry, polish without judgment, structure without necessity. That is the slop people fear, and they are right to fear it.

But that fear does not make every AI assisted work an act of evacuation. It makes judgment more necessary. The problem is not that a tool entered the process. The problem is when the tool becomes the source, the thinker, the witness, and the maker, while the human being merely forwards the result.

Accountability does not require foolproof closure. Literature has never had that. People can lie about tools as easily as they can lie about influence, labor, collaboration, experience, or originality. Some writers will use AI and deny it. Some will use AI and exaggerate it. Some may avoid AI entirely and still find advantage in letting suspicion or ambiguity gather around the work. No system removes the need for judgment.

The maker can only be asked to stand behind the work. If the maker is evasive, that becomes part of the reader's judgment. If the maker is clear, that also becomes part of the reader's judgment. Accountability is not a detector, a certificate, or a ritual confession. It is the author's willingness to be answerable for the source, pressure, claims, and shape of the work.

Judgment is not a single verdict delivered at the moment of reading. It happens over time. A reader weighs the work, the claims around the work, the maker's conduct, the source of the pressure, the evidence of attention, the history of the voice, and the responsibility the work asks the maker to carry. That judgment may remain uncertain, and it may change. Uncertainty is not failure. It is the ordinary condition of serious reading.

This is why “a computer touched it” cannot be the standard. I have been writing on computers since 1990. The word processor touched the work. Spell check touched the work. Search engines, archives, layout programs, printers, templates, and screens touched the work. AI is more powerful than a word processor, with capacities that extend far beyond typing, correction, and layout. But it still belongs to the history of tools entering the act of making.

Otherwise the purity test becomes comic very quickly. Which is the purest writer: the one who writes longhand only, the one who uses a typewriter but no spell check, the one who revises but never workshops, the one who workshops but rejects every edit, the one who refuses AI but writes in the approved dialect of the current guild? Purity always wants a hierarchy. Writing asks for something harder: judgment.

AI can assist the work around a poem. It can reveal structure, trace repetition, locate tonal drift, clarify hidden argument, expose cliché, organize a poetics, build an archive, or create a chamber of sustained attention around work that might otherwise pass through the world unread. It can mimic a poem. It can produce poem-like surfaces. It can arrange lines, images, turns, silences, and gestures in a plausible poetic shape. But it cannot write a poem.

A poem has to begin somewhere else. It has to be humanly incurred. It has to pass through a life, a body, an ear, a memory, a wound, a pressure, a place, a history, a condition of perception. It has to come from someone who can answer for what has been made. AI can imitate the record of that pressure, but it cannot undergo it. It can produce language about grief without grieving, language about desire without desiring, language about fear without being afraid, language about death without knowing that it will die.

A reader may not always know, from the surface alone, whether a poem has been incurred or simulated. That uncertainty is real. It cannot be solved by detectors, purity tests, or forensic suspicion. It can only be met by provenance, disclosure, trust, judgment, and the maker’s willingness to stand behind the work.

The poem becomes art because a human necessity has found form. The line is not sacred because it has remained untouched by tools. Poets have always used tools: dictionaries, notebooks, typewriters, spell check, workshops, friends, editors, libraries, recordings, translations, memory, imitation, and accident. The issue is not untouched purity. The issue is accountable source.

AI may become part of the ordinary passage of language into public life. It may assist essays, letters, captions, summaries, grant drafts, institutional prose, and even the critical apparatus around poems. It may also become useful to artists in strange and resistant ways, especially when used against its own smoothness. But when AI is asked to be the originating poet, the center gives way. The poem may look like a poem. It may contain impressive effects. But the lived pressure has been simulated rather than

incurred. The machine can produce language. It cannot bear responsibility for what the poem requires.

Here the contrast becomes personal. AI can be used as a detector, a way to police the surface of a text and assign suspicion. That is the panic model. It can also be used as a chamber of sustained attention, a way to keep pressure on structure, sequence, argument, repetition, and form. That is how I used it.

The contrast becomes personal because I have used AI intensely in the making of a book. *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate & The Groaning Book: A Poetics* was not intended as a middle finger to the literary and critical apparatus, but it functions as one. A poet with history, knowledge, civic experience, artistic standards, and a long body of poems used ordinary desktop tools, Microsoft Word, Krita, and AI as a pressure chamber, to create a serious book object outside the usual permission structure.

The point is not that AI made the book. It did not. The poems are human made. The lived field, ear, sequence, pressure, memory, anger, restraint, civic history, and aesthetic judgment are mine. AI did not discover the work, invent the poems, choose the burden, or live the life behind them.

The Groaning Book itself belongs to a different category from the poems. It is a companion poetics: artful prose, argument, structure, documentation, interpretation, and book making gathered around the poems. AI can assist the architecture around the art without becoming the source of the art.

AI helped create a chamber of sustained attention. It helped test claims, organize structure, clarify lineages, pressure weak language, locate repetitions, build the companion architecture, and hold the poems in view long enough for a poetics to emerge around them. It was not unaided attention. It was driven attention. The tool attended because I directed it to attend.

AI did not replace authorship. It exposed the vacancy around it. Poetry has become, in many ways, like an abandoned factory. The structure still stands. The material history is visible. The place still carries evidence of use, labor, abandonment, and possibility. Poems are still written, published, performed, and taught. But many of the old pathways between poems and general readers have narrowed or disappeared. The newspaper critic is mostly gone. Local arts coverage is thinner. Bookstores carry less poetry. Public reading series survive unevenly. What remains is often credentialed, professionalized, or hidden inside the academy. There is little room for a working poet who stands outside those systems.

The issue is not poets being ignored. The issue is a damaged ecology. The poem's public life has narrowed while poetic technique has spread everywhere. AI did not create that vacancy. It entered it.

That is why I distrust the hysteria. The danger is real, but the scale is often misread. The professional language class experiences AI as an existential crisis because AI has reached its own forms of labor and authority. The machine has reached the sentence. It has reached interpretation, summary, polish, fluency, commentary, and voice. That feels metaphysical if those things have been mistaken for the center of human meaning.

Tools can harm. Tools can be captured. Tools can widen inequality. Tools can be used for fraud, surveillance, coercion, slop, institutional evasion, and the erosion of trust. Those dangers call for accountability, literacy, public pressure, institutional clarity, and better distinctions, not exorcism.

At the very moment when authorship, voice, mediation, personhood, originality, influence, and textual agency became the humanities' central subject again, much of the field answered with policing instead of thought.

AI can gather testimony, summarize testimony, translate testimony, arrange testimony, and imitate the structure of witness. It can synthesize thousands of accounts into a coherent narrative. But synthesis is not witness. A witness is not merely a processor of records. A witness is a subject who has stood somewhere, risked something, perceived through a body, remembered under pressure, and remains answerable to the truth of an account.

To call machine synthesis "collective witness" is to mistake arrangement for moral presence. The machine can organize the record of human witness. It cannot become the one who was there. It cannot live with the consequences of what it says.

The first act of responsibility is refusing to mythologize the tool. AI is neither demon nor god, neither artist nor witness. It is a human-made tool, built inside human systems and used inside them. It can assist, deceive, amplify, flatten, expose, help, and produce language. It can also be captured. It cannot bear witness. That work remains human.